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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart, where we're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson. I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger. They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they're pretty good preachers. Alright, let's get started. David, where are we in the church year?

David: We are at the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, a time when the church celebrates the work of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the church. As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach on. David, will you go first?

Sure. I would preach on the Gospel reading. So this is that first set of parables in Mark's Gospel. It is a good time to just kind of lean into parables and this particular one.

So, Jessica, if you could read that first parable, verses 26 through 29.

Jessica: And he said, the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows.

He knows not how. The earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.

But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.

David: Okay. So I like this parable because it has what I would call the mysterious middle. So that's what I would actually title the sermon, the mysterious middle.

Because the parable begins and ends with certain action on the part of a human character. So the kingdom of God is as if a man scatters seed. So we go out, we scatter seed, we're doing something,

we're scattering it in hope of what's going to happen and then it ends with that person again.

You know, the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.

So it begins with certain hope, it ends with certain joy, but in the middle, what you have is that phrase,

he knows not how. So the guy who's doing the work of scattering the seed and doing the work of the reaping,

in the middle, he has absolutely no clue how it happens.

The reason I like that is that I know a lot of people who are living in the mysterious middle.

And you just wish you could, you know, help them celebrate the certain beginning and help them hope for the certain end.

Right? So I'm thinking of a person who has a child who has walked away from the faith.

And she baptized him, she raised him in the church, and now went away to college, he's kind of walking away from the faith.

And, you know, I just want to say you're in the mysterious middle. You don't know. You don't know.

I've known people who have walked away from the faith and come back.

I can't say that it'll happen for sure, but the parable kind of gives us this picture, this paradigm of what life can be like in God's kingdom,

where there's a long period. I mean, you know, you're thinking about the whole period when all of this grows.

That's an entire season, an entire season where you don't know what God's doing.

Peter: Well, and you think about just the parable, it makes me think about he sleeps and rises night and day, day in, day out, goes to bed each night not knowing.

David: Right. Right.

Peter: And it kind of invites this long-haul perspective on, you know, how many people go to sleep worrying about things and wake up and it's not taken care of yet.

David: Right.

Peter: And they go to bed the next day and it's still the worries and the concerns, the uncertainties are still there.

David: Right.

Peter: And that kind of that mysterious middle can be really long.

David: Right. Right.

And you just want to tell people that, you know, the parable is telling us in the kingdom of God, there are times when there's a mysterious middle.

And not only is there a mysterious middle, but God is working in it.

Right.

So you've got this way in which God works beyond our understanding.

His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts.

And yet he is at work. He will not allow a bruised reed to be broken.

He's not going to snuff out a smoldering wick.

He's going to seek to find and save.

And so there's that, you know, you can think of, I think you can think of examples in scripture of people who lived in that mysterious middle.

I'm thinking in the Gospel of John, Nicodemus.

He comes to Jesus in the middle of the night. He's coming asking questions.

And at the very end of the Gospel, he's kind of blatantly out there bringing, I don't know, 70 pounds of spices or something to the tomb.

But in the middle, in the middle, he's kind of in that lost zone where he's trying to defend Jesus.

And yet he's getting rejection from the other, you know, from the other Pharisees, the other teachers.

You think of the Apostle Peter starts out immediately following Jesus, confesses him to be the Christ,

and at the very end gives us life for Jesus. But in the middle, in the middle, you got this denial of Jesus.

Peter: Well, even the middle, you know, just thinking about the middle between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The uncertainty and the fear, Jesus had already told them he was going to rise from the dead multiple times.

And yet that middle is a time of fear and uncertainty. And that's where we live.

David: Yeah. And then for me, so like the Gospel handle thing, right, is that when Jesus is crucified, where is he?

He's in the middle between two thieves. He is in the mysterious middle.

And out of that mysterious middle, he's able to bring salvation.

Peter: Well, you could do middle between the two thieves. You could also do the middle between heaven and earth.

David: Oh, oh, yeah, that's nice. Position between God and man.

Between heaven and earth and between, you know, now and a new creation. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So there's that. So for me, the theme is a mysterious middle. And I'm kind of, you know, I guess I would brainstorm who are other people whose lives I could tell as having a mysterious middle.

Peter: We live in this culture where knowledge helps us deal with things.

You know, how many times people say things like, if I just knew X, Y, Z, then I could handle it.

David: Right.

Jessica: Oh, that's so true. Yeah. That's absolutely true.

Peter: And it's particularly hard when we have so much knowledge at our fingertips that we are kind of conditioned to require almost that knowledge.

And this gives space and permission to know not how.

David: Right. To not know. To not know exactly what God's doing in this time.

And you know, if you try to figure it out, sometimes you kill things, right?

Peter: Well, you take things into your own hands and then you really, sometimes we cause all sorts of trouble.

David: Yeah. So if you kind of sow seed and then in the middle dig it up and look at it, you're going to kill this seed, right?

I mean, I got bees, right? The mysterious middle for bees is basically January, February and March.

You're not sure if they're going to make it. They've kind of huddled through the winter.

Are they going to have enough honey stores to survive? Are they going to make it or not?

You open that hive, you're going to decimate them if it's cold because they're just going to die. They're going to freeze. And so, you know, there's kind of, there's a way in which Christians can be encouraged to hold on, even though they don't understand everything. And in a culture that so values knowledge, like you said,

and has instrumentalized it as it's through knowledge that we're going to be able to fix everything.

That's a big ask. It's a big ask. But that's what I think Jesus is doing in the parables.

I think that's why you even have parables. Every parable has this mysterious middle to it that hasn't yet been revealed.

And that is the work of the Son of God dying and rising for salvation.

That's what's at the heart of the parables. And yet it's not revealed yet.

Peter: Well, I also like how this one, this parable points toward the harvest that is to come.

David: Right.

Peter: Things we will know, things will be made right in the end. And so that invites you to kind of help people live in the meantime.

David: Right.

Jessica: Yes, I think this will be so encouraging to those of us sitting in the pew because we are all in the middle.

Right. Jesus is supposed to come back, but it's been a long time.

My kids the other day in the car on the way to school, my son said, you know, is Jesus really going to come back again?

Because it's just been so long. Like maybe we had that wrong. And he's really young and he's just trying to understand.

But if you consider we are in the middle and it's OK if there's questions in the middle.

David: Right.

Jessica: It'll be so good for us in the pew to hear you telling us that it's OK, that it's OK for in the middle and it stinks right now.
It doesn't mean that our faith isn't right.

David: Right.

Jessica: Or that God doesn't hear us. But the middle part is.

David: Yeah. It's OK. Because God actually came to be in the middle.

Jessica: And this isn't the end.

David: Be in the middle of the mess, be in the middle of our sin.

Jessica: Yeah.

David: And to bring us with him into the end. Right.

Jessica: Peter, what about you? What would you preach on?

Peter: I think I would like to preach on the second Corinthians five passage.
There's a lot in this versus. And so one of the one of the challenges to a text like this is to narrow everything.
And so that's that's one thing. The other thing that draws me to second Corinthians five is actually a textual detail that if you look really closely in the Greek.
Now, again, we've talked about using Greek and Hebrew before. And, you know, you've got to be careful how much you you bring into a sermon because people don't speak Greek.
But there's a really interesting translation decision in verse 17. And so I kind of that's what set me on this path.
But to get there, would you read Jessica verse 16 and 17?

Jessica: From now on therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh, even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh.
We regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.
The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.

Peter: OK, so verse 17 is it's one of these it's like a confirmation verse, right?
It's one of these verses that a lot of people know if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

What I find interesting about this is in the Greek, it just says if anyone is in Christ, a new creation.
It doesn't say he is a new creation, which to me is very interesting because if anyone is in Christ, it's not just that he's new.
Everything is new.

David: I like that. I like that.

Peter: And so when I think about I think about preaching, you know, we've talked about this before as kind of world making.
You know, when you preach the gospel.

David: You have a great article on that.

Peter: Well, well, it's the idea is that...

Jessica: Where is this article?

David: It's in the Concordia Journal. It's called Preacher as World Maker, right?

Peter: Yeah, it is. And it's the idea is that when you when you are in Christ, when God grants you faith in his son, Jesus.
You are not just changed. Everything is changed. Your whole world, all of creation is changed in Christ.
And so I know when I first got onto this, it was because I was in our Homeletics class.
I had students preaching on this text and I had them read Mark Seifrid's commentary.

David: OK.

Peter: And the Pillar New Testament series. I don't know if you're familiar with that commentary.

But so Mark Seifrid teaches New Testament here, New Testament exegete.

That is one of the best commentaries I've ever read. It is so devotional, so much homiletical application.

But he has a section in there about noticing how this is much broader than just the individual's life.

It's kind of a whole... The in-breaking of the new creation happens for anyone who is in Christ. But the way I suggest you frame it is to pick up the second half of verse 17.

The old has passed away. The new has come. To me, that invites a sermon that is kind of a comparison and contrast.

We're going to contrast something old with something new. And so the big picture is the new creation.

Well, what aspect of the creation are you going to focus on? Because you can't obviously you can't talk about everything.

David: And you see yourself doing this several times or like one big old and new?

Peter:

Well, I think you got a couple of different options. I think I'd rather go with one big old and new.

David: OK.

Peter: Just to keep the sermon focused. So the old way of doing things is to operate by what we can see instead of living by faith.

That one would be more... would be a little bit broader than the regarding others.

The regarding others is really, you know, how do we think of other people?

This is just in general, walk by faith, not by sight.

Another way you could look at the old versus the new is to look at verse 14 and 15.

Would you read 14 and 15, Jessica?

Jessica: For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this, that one has died for all.

Therefore all have died, and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves,

but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Peter: OK, so the old way in these verses in verse 15 would be living for themselves.

We live for ourselves. And the new would be the love of Christ controls us.

We no longer live for ourselves, we no longer control our own lives, but Christ controls us and leads us to live for others.

Again, I think I would not try to do all these in one sermon because it would take too many different directions,

but the one I think that I would maybe lean into is in verse 6 and verse 8, Paul uses this phrase,

we are always of good courage. He says that in verse 6 and then he repeats it again in verse 8.

Yes, we are of good courage. And I would contrast maybe, what's the opposite of courage, what would you say?

Jessica: Fear.

Peter: Fear. That's what my first thought was.

David: Timidity.

Peter: Maybe hesitancy. I think fear is so dominant in our culture. I think we live in a lot of fear.

David: Well, you know, the interesting thing is with courage, courage is one of those virtues that is a mean,

it's a middle between fear and foolishness.

So, if you're foolish, you rush in without even any forethought and you just do what you're doing because you're foolhardy.

If you're fearful, you run away. But courage is that ability to act without letting fear take over and without letting foolishness take over.

And I think, you know, when we think about situations, you know, in kind of the church and the church's interaction with the world,

we've got those who are foolish and just rushing in and doing all sorts of things and we've got those who are fearful and just pulling away.

And courage is that middle space where you're thoughtful and you're faithful and trusting that God will be present.

Peter: Yeah, I mean, you could say it instead of good courage, you could say confidence.

And sometimes there's overconfidence and sometimes there's kind of a lack of confidence.

David: That's right.

Peter: But Paul is saying here, we, the ones who are in Christ, the ones for whom there is a new creation, we live confidently in good courage.

David: Right.

Peter: And so there's no place, there's no need for fear in the Christian life, in the Christian world, because the old has passed away, the new has come.

And the new life that we have in Christ now removes fear.

I mean, of course, you can think about what Paul says to Timothy, that we have not been given a spirit of timidity, but of love and power and self-control.

So I think, I actually think you could ask your listeners this week, if I were in the parish right now,

I would, every meeting I had, every visit in the hospital or in a nursing home, I would go to my youth group and I would just ask the people in my congregation to name what causes them to be afraid or that diminishes their confidence or takes away their courage.

And I would spend a week listening to my hearers talk about what scares them.

Peter: And then I would let that shape kind of maybe the direction I go here.

David: I like the way you rephrased the question where you said not just what makes you afraid or what are you afraid of, but what takes away your confidence.

What causes you to lack confidence, I mean, to lack trust.

I think those, that I think is helpful because it'll cause me to name very particular experiences that are draining me, right?

And that you can then address.

Yeah, I liked that way of phrasing your question.

Peter: So earlier this year, you guys know I was over in Africa teaching some MA students and it was interesting to talk to them about fears that Christians have in East Africa.

And, you know, there's a lot of fears that are similar probably.

One fear that was different, very different than at least something that I'm afraid of or that hurts my confidence is they talked about a fear of witch doctors and the kind of evil spirits that we live in this disenchanting culture where it's not really on

But we were talking about the real life fear of witch doctors and I asked, well, how do you handle that as pastors and as Christians here?

And they said, well, we just, we tell people, don't worry, Jesus is stronger than the witch doctors.

David: Good.

Peter: And so have confidence.

David: Right.

Peter: Be of good courage.
The one who is for you, the one in whom you have a new creation, you are a new creation, he's stronger.

David: Right.

Peter: And so you don't need to be afraid.

David: If anyone is in Christ, new creation.

Peter: New creation.

David: Right.

Jessica: That's interesting because you think maybe they could have said, witch doctors aren't such a big deal.

David: Right.

Jessica: The spirits, they're not as strong as you think they are.

Oh, the thing you're afraid of is kind of small, but they said the thing that saves you is just bigger. Still acknowledged the awful things.

David: Right.
The reality of it.

Peter: So part of this sermon, you'd want to, I think you'd want to spend some time thinking about in Christ.
If anyone is in Christ, now that's a loaded phrase for Paul.

David: Oh, that's, yeah, there's a lot of study there.

Peter: There's a lot of study there.
And so, you know, that would, it'd be, it'd be a good chance to kind of review your Pauline understanding of faith in Christ and the, and what it means to be in Christ.

David: And if I remember correctly, isn't 2 Corinthians written after Paul himself had a major crisis or,

Peter: Yeah, I mean,

David: trauma in his life?

Peter: 2 Corinthians is such a personal letter.

That's what's so, what's really, and this is where Seifrid's commentary is really helpful in this, that when Paul's writing in 2 Corinthians, he's writing from his own experience, his own heart, his own angst, his own personal trauma.
And so you can, you can picture Paul even, I mean, you might even do this in the sermon. You know, Paul reflected on himself.
He is a new creation.
There's a new creation for him.
He is, since he's been in Christ, the whole world is different.
He's no longer afraid of persecution.
He's no longer afraid of anything that would be, would sap his courage or drain his courage.
And I think the goal then of the sermon would be to encourage, in courage, instill courage in your hearers.
That's not thoughtless, foolish, and it's not faithless, but it's standing firm.

Jessica: What if those of us sitting in the pew hear that and we're worried that if we are afraid, it means we don't have faith?

Peter: I think it would maybe be helpful even just to name that.

If you, and this is where I think it'd be helpful to spend some time in conversation with your members, your congregation this week.

You know, if you get the sense that people are afraid they don't believe hard enough, or that somehow they haven't conjured up enough faith.

What's neat about this phrase, just in Christ, and this is where the room for the gospel is, needs to be proclaimed.

To be in Christ is to be declared, God promises through his word, through baptism, that he brings us into Christ.

We are united with Christ.

And so if that's a fear that members of your congregations have, then I'd definitely address that head on.

And point them away from their need to conjure up faith and point them to the promise of Christ.

David: Yeah, I mean, their being in Christ has nothing to do with what they're doing.

It's what God has done for them.

You know, you are in Christ, I'm telling you that.

I'm not inviting you to be in Christ, to try to be in Christ, and you do that by having no fear.

No, you're in Christ, God did that.

Peter: And I think it's a real live question when you say, Jessica, because sometimes the way, sometimes we talk about faith almost as something we have to come up with.

And that's not what Paul's talking about here.

This is a promise that you are in Christ.

And the sermon would proclaim that promise, you are in Christ, and you are a part of this whole new world, this new creation.

Jessica: I always like it when you describe your sermons as something that doesn't tell you to have more courage, but conjures up courage.

David: Right.

Jessica: I love it when you, that always encourages me.

David:

Yeah, there's that idea that in preaching to foster faith, you give the goods that people trust in. So rather than telling you to have faith, I tell you the things that God has done for you, and you believe in them.

Jessica: That takes a lost statement like, be joyful, into a gospel statement that you get to be joyful because of what God has done for you.

Jessica: Thanks, guys.

That's all for today.

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I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.

Join us next week here at Lectionary Kickstart when Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

David: He knows not how.